
Choosing the Right Theme

One of the most common questions when someone gets a website is, "What's it going to look like?" Sure, it's exciting to see the site, but it's also the most difficult part for some people to make a decision about. Everybody has an opinion on colors, fonts, buttons, photos - and it can turn into chaos quickly.

At GeorgiaGov, we've taken much of the hard work out of the equation, giving you a more streamlined decision-making process that will help identify you as a State of Georgia entity while still giving you the flexibility and branding your agency needs. In this guide, you'll learn:

- The decision-making process behind the theme approach.
- Advantages of using themes.
- And how to choose the best theme for your agency.

1 An (Almost) Blank Canvas

First, let's talk about what a theme is - and isn't.

A theme, or template as some systems call it, is a collection of files in Drupal that governs some general visual styles. Themes dictate the main colors of a site, textures, buttons and typefaces.

That's it. It doesn't have anything to do with image sizes, whether an article has two or three columns, or whether there is a box for Twitter on the home page. Much of your website's look and feel relies solely on **what you put into it**.

Think of it in artistic terms. A theme is like the media that you would use to paint a picture (oil on canvas, watercolor on paper). But what the picture looks like is entirely up to you.

Another analogy: Think of a theme as a mannequin in a store. You've seen some that are lifelike, some that are more

abstract, some with arms and some with no legs. But very few people pay attention to the mannequin. It's the clothes that are on the mannequin (the content) that matters most.

How did you come up with the themes?

It was a pretty long process.

When we were migrating sites from Vignette to Drupal in 2011, we had an opportunity to redesign the sites. But with 50 sites to migrate, we couldn't create 50 different designs based on 50 different requirements and tastes - it would make the process impossible to manage.

We saw a need to have a common user experience among all sites. Many times you just couldn't tell if a website was part of the State of Georgia. By creating this common experience you'd assure users that they were on a legitimate site and give them some familiarity when browsing these sites.

At the same time, we also recognized that agencies needed their own identity. We didn't want a cookie-cutter approach where every single site looked the same. We needed to find a middle ground.

We did this by dividing agencies up into areas of interest. Many agencies share the same constituents and have a common goal or purpose. They share the same values. But all are not the same. For example, the Department of Human Services and Georgia Bureau of Investigation have two totally different purposes; one probably does not want to look like the other.

So we created [different themes](#) [1] encompassing six different types of websites: Patriotic, Official, Friendly, Classic, Environmental and Portal. (We'll discuss each theme in a little more detail later.)

2 Advantages of Themes

1. **Cost-effectiveness.** Developing a theme from scratch takes a lot of hours of development, design and testing. By using themes, you save time and money.
2. **Ease of editing.** The themes are configured so that many blocks of information can drop into many different areas of the site. It's like a modular shelving unit - you can just pick a box/module and it will fit into the theme without extra development.
3. **Accessibility.** All themes have been tested in modern browsers and have been designed and built to meet accessibility requirements, from the very beginning of the project. Visual designs were reviewed for color contrast for low-visibility visitors, aiming to meet or exceed WCAG 2.0 (Level AA), and the site is built on the OpenPublic Drupal distribution, which provides improved keyboard and screen reader experience for content creators and editors.
4. **Mobile Friendly.** All themes are responsive, meaning that they dynamically resize based on the type of device accessing the site.

Won't my site look like everyone else's?

Remember, a theme is just a starting point. Your logo and name will be at the top of each page. And a lot of your site's look and feel depends solely on your content - the images, boxes and functionality that you provide.

3 How to Choose a Theme

1. **Discover your message.** Look at your agency’s constituents, your mission, and the services you provide. What type of message do you want to send?

2. **Explore the choices.** Take a look at the themes at demo.georgia.gov [1]. You can choose a different theme from the drop down menu at the bottom of the page.

Note: Don’t pay attention to the content! Look at the content only to see how headlines and images will display in the various themes. The important thing here is to focus on how each theme renders the same site differently so you can compare the subtle differences.

3. **Find your match.** Consult the chart below to find the right match based on the message you desire.

Theme	Created for	Messages
<i>Patriotic</i>	Elected Officials	Authoritative, official, friendly
<i>Friendly</i>	Human Services	People-focused, soft, friendly, happy
<i>Official</i>	Law Enforcement, Administrative	Trusted, authoritative, serious, clean, official
<i>Environmental</i>	Natural Resources	Elegant, natural, calm, local
<i>Portal</i>	Consistent user experience with GeorgiaGov	Simple, clean, official
<i>Classic</i>	General services	Friendly, modern, clean, fresh

4. **Minimize.** Try to have as few people involved in the decision-making as possible. Unfortunately, everyone has an opinion when it comes to design, and having too many people looking at the themes may make it difficult to narrow it down to one.

5. **Trust the experts.** At this time, we can’t mix and match colors and typefaces from different themes. Each theme’s elements were paired together to create a certain tone. You also can’t choose different colors or typefaces: as mentioned earlier, these colors have been approved by the Department of Economic Development as part of the State’s official color palette. And the typefaces were also chosen for readability and legibility.

By carefully creating and customizing each theme to fit our agency’s brands and messages, our palette of choices are proven to offer Georgia constituents with a common user experience while also providing individuality and distinction for your agency’s website.

Source URL: <http://portal.georgia.gov/interactive/web-guide/choosing-right-theme>